May the Giant Be With You: Twin Peaks Season Two, Episode One and the Television Auteur

sensesofcinema.com/2016/twin-peaks/lynch-televison-auteur/

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Abstract

The premiere of season two of *Twin Peaks* garnered some of the highest ratings of the series, with celebrated filmmaker and co-creator David Lynch stepping back into the director's chair. Yet, within this episode many traditional television conventions are flouted, and in response the following week the ratings dropped dramatically. From its slow-paced opening scenes in which an old man admonishes the wounded, bleeding protagonist to drink his warm milk before it gets cold, followed by a vision of a giant speaking in riddles, this episode not only tested its audience's patience, it also seemed to set out to deliberately confuse them.



Directed by David Lynch

In this essay I will explore this episode as an example of auteur television, in which the director expresses a consistency of style and theme that is similar to their other work, as well as examining how Lynch's approach to televisual aesthetics has influenced the way that contemporary film directors have crossed over into the television medium. However, when taking into account the differences between the two media of film and television, notions of authorship, with regards to the position of the director, become complicated, especially when considering contemporary television and the rise of the showrunner as the key creative force. Even when looking back at Lynch's contribution to *Twin Peaks* it becomes clear that the series was deeply collaborative, with Lynch absent during parts of the filming. Yet, when examining the extensive material that has been written about *Twin Peaks* there is still a continuing tendency to place Lynch as the sole author. The placement of Lynch as author can be argued in relation to the episodes he directed (as will be explored below in relation to the first episode of Season Two), but authorship can not be attributed to him alone when considering the series as a whole. Finally, I will discuss how the figure of the television auteur has become a central element of television reception rather than production, an integral part of a viewer's search for narrative meaning in a medium where complexity and mystery are now expected and enjoyed. Just as fans scrambled to uncover the many secrets and mysteries of *Twin Peaks* by looking to Lynch's other works for answers, a similar process is experienced by fans of television shows existing today.

Lynch as Auteur

The notion that a film is the product of a sole author has been discussed and debated since François Truffaut's seminal 1954 article "A Certain Tendency in the French Cinema". Truffaut railed against the dominance of the producer and screenwriter, championing those directors who imbued their films with their own distinctive signature style and world view. For Truffaut the language of cinema is a visual one, expressed through images composed by the director. In television, by contrast, the label of auteur is often assigned to the head writer and executive producer – who is referred to as the "showrunner" – as typified by examples such as David Chase (*The Sopranos,* 1999-2007), Bryan Fuller (*Hannibal,* 2013-2015) and Nick Pizzolatto (*True Detective,* 2014-). Some showrunners, such as Fuller and Pizzolatto, do not direct any episodes, but are acknowledged in the press as the main creative force behind the show's narrative trajectory and overall visual style.

In his book *Difficult Men* Brett Martin cites "the ascendency of the all-powerful writer-showrunner" as a cornerstone of the new "golden age" of television. Martin goes on to align this new figure with that of the film auteur, stating that : "What all the showrunners shared – and shared with the directors whom Chase held in such high esteem – was the seemingly limitless ambition of men given the chance to make art in a once vilified commercial medium". Martin refers here to David Chase, who always had the ambition to be a film director, an auteur in the vein of Martin Scorsese, Robert Altman and other directors of the New Hollywood period. Martin goes on to explore how the late 1990s and early 2000s represented a unique moment when the television medium, previously dismissed as overly reliant on formulaic episodic programming, allowed for more experimentation and exploration than that found in the cinema – at least in mainstream Hollywood, which is still lost in a sea of remakes, sequels and blockbuster franchises.

Thus, when discussing auteurism in *Twin Peaks*, the differences between the film and television auteur become apparent. David Lynch's status as a recognised film auteur is undeniable. There is a wealth of material devoted to the exploration and analysis of Lynch's cinema works, all of which position Lynch as the purveyor of a singular, personal vision. Film scholar Martha P. Nochimson has written two books and several articles on Lynch's work, examining in particular Lynch's subversion of gender roles, while Michel Chion wrote a monograph that aligns with his preoccupation with sound in cinema. Psychoanalytical film theory is a popular methodology with which to investigate Lynch, while the significance of visual art and architecture and themes of religion and morality are all considered in book-length studies. Specific films have been focused on, and several edited anthologies have been published. This quick survey reveals the multitude of written studies that already exist in relation to Lynch's film work, as well as the powerful urge to

explore and scrutinise, from a range of different perspectives, the dreams and mysteries that his creations contain.

Added to these works of film analysis is the growing scholarship that focuses on *Twin Peaks* specifically. From the outset the series was placed alongside Lynch's films as another work within his filmography, as much a product of his imagination as *Eraserhead* (1977) or *Blue Velvet* (1986). In his auteurist study *Authorship and the Films of David Lynch: Aesthetic Receptions in Contemporary Hollywood*, Antony Todd cites several examples from academic publications and the popular press, both of which proclaim *Twin Peaks* as a text with Lynch as its author. Todd states: "Lynch was to command respect as an individual who had single-handedly refigured the conservative, ratings-led conventions of television soap opera." In this article I will interrogate the commonly held view that Lynch is *Twin Peaks*' main author, questioning its validity, while also acknowledging the contribution that Lynch has made to television aesthetics and fan engagement.

The first scholarly book to examine *Twin Peaks*, the anthology *Full of Secrets: Critical Approaches to Twin Peaks* (edited by David Lavery), contains much discussion of Lynch's place as the author of the series. While Lavery's introduction recognises that the show contains many of "Lynch's firmly established auteur signatures," it also conforms to Umberto Eco's claim that the postmodern text must appear to have "no authors", given that the series incorporates a high level of intertextuality and pastiche. In contrast, Jonathan Rosenbaum argues that other directors on the show self-consciously mimic Lynch's style, "but without Lynch to realise them on screen, they lose much of their punch and vibrancy." In terms of audience reception, Henry Jenkins examines the importance of Lynch as author in relation to early fan communities, who often justified their interest in the show and their fixation on solving its mysteries to Lynch's status as "master programmer" and "trickster", by looking for answers to the series' enigmas across all of Lynch's work. Even articles that do not focus on Lynch's authorship still position the series as an auteur piece, as in Scott Hamilton Suter's article on Emersonian Transcendentalism, which states that "from the beginning of the pilot viewers are aware that *Twin Peaks* will be presented from Lynch's perspective. Despite the number of directors and writers, the world of the town of Twin Peaks is distinctly a Lynch-envisioned place".

More recently, the 2014 Blu-ray release of the first two seasons of the show and the prequel film *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me* (1992), which was directed by Lynch with limited involvement from co-creator Mark Frost, further emphasised the centrality of Lynch. Most of the newly filmed extras contained on the release involve Lynch in conversation with various crew and cast members (the absence of Frost in these new extras is noticeable). Eight months after the Blu-ray release, as many await the third season of *Twin Peaks*, there was a momentary panic when it was announced that Lynch

would not be returning as director, due to monetary restrictions imposed by Showtime (the network producing the new series). In response, several of the original cast members, such as Sherilyn Fenn, Catherine E. Coulson, and Dana Ashbrook, contributed to a video as part of the viral campaign #SaveTwinPeaks, in a bid to get Showtime and Lynch to renegotiate. In the video each participant completed the sentence "*Twin Peaks* without David Lynch is like…", with each response demonstrating how integral Lynch is to the show (for example, Peggy Lipton states that "*Twin Peaks* without David Lynch is like pies without cherries"). Following on from this video, multitudes of fans took to social media to add their own responses, indicating that the view of Lynch as fundamental to the show's essence and success still continues.

Despite this standard view, Todd mentions that, "While most critics took up *Twin Peaks* as a Lynch text, the series was the most collaborative enterprise that Lynch had taken, or been given, creative credit for." It should be noted that Lynch only directed six episodes out of thirty in the first two seasons, and during much of the second season he left the lion's share of the show's running to Mark Frost. It is here that the differences between the film and television auteur become more marked, as Frost's contribution is often elided even though he was taking on what would now be considered as the showrunner role. Frost is quoted as saying:

> *There were times when David was making Wild At Heart, when I was doing almost all the work on Twin Peaks… But everybody wants to believe in the auteur theory, that it all somehow springs from one person, and David had the much higher profile. I felt a little bit like Paul McCartney after Lennon had been shot – suddenly he was the one responsible for all the writing and all the work, whereas it was very much a collaboration.*

Lynch is only listed as the writer of the first three episodes (in contrast to eleven writing credits for Frost), but it is known that when he did direct his episodes he often discarded the written script and devised his own scenes. Kyle MacLachlan states:

> *One of the more charming conflicts of Twin Peaks was when [David] came in to direct occasionally. He'd throw out whatever script had been devised to move the story on, and do what he felt like doing. And these amazing, mesmerising episodes that hardly related to anything that was going on around them would come out of that. The writers would be despairing.*

As I will go on to examine, within those six episodes directed by Lynch there is an inventiveness and experimentation with the form and aesthetics of the television episode that, while innovative for the time, has since gone on to become established convention.

Season Two, Episode One

Firstly, some background information is needed on the situation for the show when it returned for season two. As is well known, the pilot episode, directed by Lynch, received ecstatic reviews, high ratings and was hailed as a revolution in the televisual form. Reggie Nadelsen of *The Independent* proclaimed it "the first masterpiece of the 90s".

The first episode of season two, alternatively titled "May the Giant Be With You", was first broadcast in the US on Sunday 30 September 1990 at 9pm. This was the second shift in timeslot for the series, after the finale had been moved from the show's initial placement on Thursday nights to Wednesday. According to the Nielsen ratings it was watched by 19.2 million households, which counts for 20 percent of the available audience and 12.2 percent of all households in the country. These were the highest ratings for all of season two, and in fact the ratings dropped dramatically the following episode, reducing from 19.2 million households to 14.4 million. This drop could be partly due to *Twin Peaks* being moved yet again from Sunday to Saturday at 10pm, a graveyard slot often felt to be the kiss of death for a series. Another reason may have been the rather strange approach that Lynch took in directing the season premiere. As Michelle Le Blanc and Colin Odell state, this episode is "alienating, frustrating and brilliant […] but on first viewing it is excruciating in the extreme." Marc Dolan goes so far as to state that "The shock of the second season opener […] was what drove away many of the show's regular viewers." For those wanting to get answers to the multiple cliff-hangers from the end of the Season One finale there was no easy, immediate payoff. For anyone who had not watched the previous series, perhaps tuning to see what the hype was about, this episode would have been impenetrable. According to Dolan, despite the negative reaction, this episode is "in many ways […] the most important episode in the entire series. In just 2 hours, it transformed nearly every character, plot, and situation in the show so that they were better suited to an ongoing narrative form." Dolan then goes on to argue that this shift was one of the reasons the show's popularity declined, as it had initially been marketed as a detective narrative, with expectations of answers and closure. I have chosen this episode in particular (rather than the series finale, which is more commonly cited as an example where Lynch deviated from the original script), because it more blatantly ignores traditional television conventions, and instead establishes new ones that are now commonplace. At a moment when a show must try to win back its viewers (and find new ones), Lynch instead decided to challenge and frustrate.

In his influential article "Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television", Jason Mittell cites *Twin Peaks* as a pioneer of the complex narrative format that is common in television today. For Mittell, this new model of complex television is "an alternative to the conventional episodic and serial forms that have typified most American television since its inception". Characterised by "extended character depth, ongoing plotting, and episodic variations," as well as generic hybridity and a dedicated and interactive cult following, Mittell claims that it is this turn toward narrative complexity that will come to define television in the current period. He then asserts that *Twin Peaks* was a "breakthrough" in this new complex form, "whose influence was far more long-lasting than the series itself, triggered a wave of programs embracing its creative narrative strategies." Beyond the immediate influence of *Twin Peaks* on programmes in the 1990s such as *The X Files* (1993-2002), current television shows such as *The Leftovers* (2014-)*, Fortitude* (2015-)*, True Detective,* and *Mr. Robot* (2015-) all utilise confusion, characters with dual identities, complicated plotlines and, most significantly, the withholding of information. At the time of *Twin Peaks*' first airing it was uncommon for a show to deliberately seek to baffle its audience, yet now it is commonplace for a new series to leave viewers confused and bewildered, to use surreal, illogical dream imagery, to withhold answers, to challenge the viewer with graphic images and violence, and to present narratives that explore deep cultural taboos.

Shifting back to the season two premiere, it is possible to see the origins of this narrative (as well as stylistic) complexity and innovation. What is most striking, as well as alienating, frustrating, and excruciating (and in hindsight, brilliant and very funny), is the episode's opening. We had last seen Agent Cooper (Kyle MacLachlan) return to his room at the Great Northern Hotel only to be met by an unseen assailant who fired three shots into Cooper's chest. His life, along with those of many other central characters, hung in the balance. After the opening credits, the season opens with a dissolve to a wide shot of The Great Northern Hotel, then cuts to a shot of Agent Cooper in his hotel room lying on the floor, bleeding from his abdomen. The telephone is off the hook and we hear Deputy Andy's voice shouting "Agent Cooper, Agent Cooper" repeatedly. It cuts to a wide shot of the hotel room door. No one is there. Then an elderly man (Hank Worden) shuffles into frame carrying a tray with a glass of warm milk on it, announcing room service. What is immediately odd and unsettling is the old man's frail and stooped appearance, as well as his complete obliviousness to the seriousness of Cooper's injuries. Cooper asks for a doctor, and the Old Waiter replies "Sure", but then does nothing about it. His attention is drawn to the phone, which he stares at as though it was something he has never seen before. He shakes his head and, again in a movement that is incredibly drawn out and awkward, fumbles with the phone receiver as he places it back on its cradle.

As the scene progresses, slowly, the waiter repeatedly ignores, or forgets, Cooper's

requests for a doctor, instead telling him he has hung up the phone and asking him to sign the bill, simply leaning over to let Cooper sign from on the floor. What then follows is a series of phrases and hand gestures repeated back and forth between the two. The Old Waiter shuffles toward the door, smiling. He turns back and says "I heard about you", and gives the thumbs-up, then winks, and walks out. There is a cut to Cooper, then a cut to the empty doorway (the same shot as earlier in the scene), and again the waiter walks back into frame and into the doorway and repeats "I heard about you", and gives the thumbs up a second time. There is a cut back to a mid-shot of Cooper as he struggles to lift his forearm and give a thumbs-up, the waiter turns and walks back out as though he has got the response he wanted. Then what was just played out is repeated all over again for a third time: a mid-shot of Cooper, a shot of the empty doorway, a beat, the waiter walks back in, winks, another thumbs-up as if waiting for another response. This time Cooper lifts his hand and shakes his index finger, the waiter nods, winks, turns and leaves the shot. Cooper lowers his hand in exhaustion.

At this point, we are now eight minutes into the episode.



The Old Waiter (Hank Worden) gives Cooper the final thumbs-up.

The reason I have described this scene so meticulously is to emphasise the intricacies and precise gestures of the characters, as well as to give a sense of the scene's pace – and the mounting frustration felt by some viewers. The Old Waiter's appearance precedes that of the Giant, which suggests that he is connected to the domain of the Black Lodge, a

fact that is later strengthened when the Old Waiter appears again just before the Giant arrives in Episode 16 when Leland is revealed to all as Laura's killer. In the finale the Old Waiter makes his final appearance in the Black Lodge itself, further illustrating his ability to travel between the two planes. The strangeness of the gestures in this scene (the repeated winks and thumbs-up) are similar to the strange, yet precise, gestures of the figures found in The Black Lodge (such as The Man From the Other Place's dance moves, or Laura Palmer's hand placement in the finale after she says "meanwhile"). These gestures seem to have no clear meaning, instead the movements create feelings and release energy, establishing an atmosphere of otherworldliness that is also outside of time (in the Black Lodge time does not move forward in a linear fashion). The slowness of the movements draws attention to them, pulling you into this different experience of time, where the body is dislocated from the physical realm.

This reaching across time is also signalled in the lines of dialogue. At several points in the scene the Old Waiter says, "Thank you, thank you kindly", a line directly taken from Hank Worden's previous role in John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956). In an early scene in *The Searchers*, Worden's character Mose Harper twice replies to other characters with the words, "thank you" and "thank you kindly", delivered with the same inflection as in the scene in *Twin Peaks*. Given that intertextual references and casting are rife throughout *Twin Peaks* (leading it to being understood as a postmodern text), this is no mere coincidence. The reference to Worden's previous role is in keeping with the series' primary metaphor of duality, of the masks and different identities between which many of *Twin Peaks*' inhabitants negotiate. Such doubling is one of Lynch's signature stylistic tropes, as can be seen, for example, in *Mulholland Drive* (2001), a film – initially conceived as a television series pilot – which dramatises the slippages between actor, role, and identity.



Hank Worden as Mose Harper in *The Searchers*.

The theme of doubling and masking continues, in the first sequence to take place outside of Cooper's hotel room, at the brothel One Eyed Jacks. What follows is a disturbing scene of father-daughter seduction between Benjamin and Audrey Horne (although Benjamin is unaware that the girl behind the mask is his daughter). This passage is quite significant, as Laura Palmer's murderer is revealed to be her own father, who had been molesting her since the age of twelve (although he was possessed by the evil BOB). Like the situation between Laura and Leland Palmer, with Audrey and Benjamin one of the participants is masked, their true identity not known by the other.



Benjamin Horne (Richard Beymer) unknowingly tries to seduce his daughter, Audrey (Sherilyn Fenn).

And so, after the slowness of the scene with the Old Waiter, the strangeness of the Giant's appearance, and the unsettling incestuous undertones of the scene with Audrey and Benjamin Horne, the second season was off to an odd start indeed. Yet the techniques, pace and content of the episode is very much in keeping with Lynch's distinctive cinematic style, containing some of the most harrowing and horrific moments from the series. One of Lynch's strengths is to imbue innocuous and even mundane images with tension and fear. Steven Jay Schneider cites an example from *Eraserhead*, where an ordinary action (taking the elevator) becomes unsettling and unnerving:

> *Henry enters his apartment building and presses the elevator button. What follows after the doors open is an extremely disconcerting period of waiting (approximately 13 seconds) for them to close again, and then an equally disconcerting ride up to Henry's floor. It is not so much that anything 'happens' during this sequence – though the lights in the elevator flicker, and briefly go out a couple of times – but our sense of foreboding is primed nevertheless, and carries over to subsequent scenes.*

Schneider posits that these images disturb "not through special effects, manipulative

camerawork or hyperbolic gross-out shots, but through images that instil in viewers a palpable feeling of uncanniness." Scenes such as the one described create a disturbance by defying expectations over what is appropriate and familiar (in this case, that the doors will close quickly and the shot will cut to after the ride is over rather than holding for the entire, uncomfortably long, trip). Schneider goes further and asserts that there is a "second level of uncanniness: for there is a sense in which, arguably, the elevator displays a primitive consciousness of sorts, intentionally and spitefully 'teasing' Henry". As Schneider suggests, an inanimate object can suddenly become infused with character and portent, creating a menacing sense of dread that foreshadows more horrific events to come. A similar moment occurs in season two, episode one of *Twin Peaks*, as Maddy Ferguson (Laura Palmer's lookalike cousin, also played by Sheryl Lee) discusses her dream from the night before with Sarah Palmer. She mentions that she had been looking at the rug in her dream from the exact same angle that she is sitting at that moment. Later in the scene, Maddy is left alone and when she looks down at the carpet again, a shadow passes over it and she starts to cry in horror. While a shadow on the carpet is a seemingly harmless image, it nevertheless terrifies Maddy. The rug seems to hold within it a sense of the evil lurking beneath the surface of the Palmer household, Maddy connects with this feeling and is terrified. Indeed, Maddy's vision is an ominous one, as it is on that very rug that she will be murdered.



Henry in the elevator in *Eraserhead*.



Maddy Ferguson (Sheryl Lee) remembers an image from her dream.

The episode's closing scene is outright terrifying, as we witness Laura's murder in the train car at the hands of BOB. Earlier in the episode Cooper and Albert Rosenfeld had narrated the events of that night, the culmination of the investigation so far, yet now we are forced to watch it. Ronnette is roused from her hospital bed as she is assailed by memories from that night – what we see is not the cold clinical rehash of a crime investigation, but the experience of someone who was actually there, who is now remembering and reliving it again. The flickering lights and fragmented editing does not reveal each gory detail, but there is the unforgettable close-up of Laura's face screaming in pain. Sound, another element that Lynch is known for utilising to create atmosphere and terror, is used in this scene to great effect, particularly the sounds of BOB's distorted, animalistic screeching and Laura's dying cries. After the languid pace throughout the feature length episode, these final images are a jolt that leaves the viewer reeling in shock.


The horrifying final moments of Laura Palmer (Sheryl Lee) in season 2, episode 1.

Legacy: Television Authorship

The difficult aspects of this episode – the pacing, the violence, the lack of resolution – set the tone for the show's decline in popularity through the rest of the season. Yet, it is these aspects that, in retrospect, have made *Twin Peaks* a cult success and kept it relevant to current trends in television. While Mark Frost is listed as the writer of the episode, it bears, as I have illustrated, many of Lynch's signature trademarks. Yet the relationship between Lynch and Frost's contributions fit with how many television shows are constructed today. It is now commonplace for a film director to direct a pilot episode and establish the look and style of a particular show. For example, Martin Scorsese directed the pilots for *Boardwalk Empire* (2010-2014) and *Vinyl* (2016-), both of which have Terence Winter as showrunner, and David Fincher directed the first two episodes of *House of Cards* (2013-), with Beau Willimon in the showrunner role. Other film directors, such as Steven Soderbergh with *The Knick* (2014-) and Lena Dunham with *Girls* (2012-), also take on the showrunner role, as well as directing many, if not all, of the episodes. As co-creator and director of key episodes, Lynch provided a similar function to these other film directors working in television by establishing the look and style, with Frost overseeing the overall narrative trajectory (particularly in the second season). Thus, we see here the collaboration between a stylistic auteur (Lynch) and a writerly auteur (Frost). It is ultimately futile to argue that one of these collaborators "owns" or controls the work more

than the other. Yet, the increasing interest in the television auteur in both academia and the press does signal that those working behind the camera are becoming of as much interest to viewers as to those who star in front of it. This is especially the case when trying to get to grips with the increased narrative complexity and intense interactivity that these shows elicit.

Further to this point regarding audience engagement with the television auteur, in his recent book *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* Jason Mittell states that the "act of attributing television to an author is a comparatively new phenomenon," one which in many respects misrepresents the television production process, but points to a larger function within wider cultural discourse:

> *Yet even though such images of authorship as a singular entity are clearly an inaccurate reflection of production practices, such conceptions still function in our understanding of television narratives, are active within industrial, critical, and fan discourses, and serve an important cultural role. In fact, we can look at authorship as one of the key products of television programming, its industrial practices, and its cultural circulation.*

Mittell uncovers how notions of authorship in television operate beyond the text itself, as a form of branding which appeals to fans in the form of paratexts such as podcasts, websites and media appearances. Authorship is thus central to *reception*, as much as production, and what Mittell outlines is strikingly similar to Jenkins' findings in his article on *Twin Peaks* fan communities published in *Full of Secrets* in 1995. Just as Jenkins revealed that fans looked to Lynch's authorial signature style for answers to narrative enigmas in *Twin Peaks*, Mittell describes how "For savvy viewers of complex television, the author figure itself becomes a ludic site of engagement and forensic fandom, as viewers attempt to parse clues and separate truth from hype." The desire, when *Twin Peaks* first aired, to designate the show as the expression of one person's vision has not only become commonplace today, but has assumed a central role in fan reception and engagement. The *Twin Peaks* Blu-ray extras and #SaveTwinPeaks viral campaign demonstrates how this inferred author function is in full effect in anticipation of the new season.

As Mittell suggests, there is a growing desire to cite the rise of the television auteur as an explanation for the medium's recent innovations. The trend amongst critics, academics, and fans to credit David Lynch as the sole author of *Twin Peaks* is one of the first examples in the history of American television where the concept of the auteur was

applied to a television programme. Although there is a tendency to falsely credit a single figure as an *auteur* in what is essentially a collaborative medium, Lynch's direction of the season two premiere demonstrates that it is possible to impose a particular vision onto the television form in a way that serves to expand and innovate. The great progress that the medium of television has made in the last 25 years stems in some small part not only from the spirit of experimentation that David Lynch bought to *Twin Peaks* episodes, but even more so to the public perceptions of Lynch as an artist who can express his singular vision within the television format. Today the television auteur is ever-present, central to an enjoyment of many television series that extends beyond the act of watching to a larger engagement with other viewers, in discussions and conjecture about the many mysteries and meanings contained within a television narrative.

This article has been peer-reviewed.

Endnotes